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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 000058

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TAGS: PREL MASS NATO KPAQ AF LO

SUBJECT: PM SIGNALS SLOVAK TROOP MOVE TO KANDAHAR - BUT
THEY WON'T LEAVE THE AIRPORT

REF: BRATISLAVA 38

Classified By: Ambassador Rodolphe M. Vallee for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
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¶1. (C) PM Robert Fico has signalled his agreement to move Slovak military engineers from Kabul to Kandahar, but with the caveat that they conduct work only at Kandahar Air Base. Fico told a Bratislava press conference upon return from his January 26 visit to Kandahar that the GOS should make a formal decision on redeployment within two to three weeks. Fico told reporters he went to Afghanistan to inspect the Kandahar airbase, accompanied by DefMin Kasicky and MinInt Kalinak, so they could check the real situation on the ground, and not have to rely on a bureaucratic decision-making process. (Comment. Post has heard from multiple other sources for several weeks that Fico arrived at his decision before planning this trip. Reftel. End comment.)

¶2. (U) Fico told the press that Slovakia, as a member of NATO, is obliged to respond to NATO requests such as the one received in October 2006 to transfer the engineers to Kandahar. He described assurances received from NATO commanders -- that Slovak combat engineers would not serve outside the airbase if they would move to Kandahar -- as a "great concession that we were able to negotiate." Fico said the engineers would be engaged repairing the airport's runway, renovating the civilian terminal, and demining. He added that moving the Slovak engineers even 30 or 40 kilometers from the airbase would be a violation of the agreement he reached with ISAF commanders in Kandahar.

¶3. (C) Embassy DATT, who traveled with the PM, reported that upon arrival in Kandahar Fico informed NATO Regional Commander South Gen. Van Loon that Slovak engineers are not fighting troops, and that he is very concerned for their safety. Van Loon responded that there is plenty of work for the Slovak engineers to do on the Kandahar airbase. Van Loon did not offer any assurances that the troops would never leave the base. Fico did not respond when Van Loon said there could be occasions when the engineers would be asked to go by helicopter to other ISAF bases in the area, which we believe means the GOS will adhere strictly to the "on-base only" condition. Our DATT reported that Gen. Van Loon was pleased with the PM's willingness to have the engineers carry out the extensive work needed at the base.

¶4. (SBU) We understand that FM Kubis informed The Secretary of the PM's trip to Afghanistan on the margins of the NATO Ministerial, but did not get into the details of the PM's decision.

¶5. (SBU) If asked by the media, post will express appreciation for this signal of a positive response to the

NATO/ISAF request for the move to Kandahar. We do not plan to go beyond that at this point. The Defense Minister now has to take up the ball and prepare a formal decision for the expected cabinet approval.

VALLEE